

The New York Times

Larry Eisenberg, 99, Dead; His Limericks Were Very Well Read

By Margalit Fox

Dec. 26, 2018

Larry Eisenberg, whom we well know,

Has died (and his age is below).

He opined on the news

With limericks, whose

Delightfulness leavens our woe.

Dr. Eisenberg, who died on Tuesday at 99, was for more than a decade one of the most prolific contributors of reader comments on nytimes.com — and, by extension, on the internet as a whole.

But what distinguished him even more than his prodigious output (more than 13,000 comments since 2008) was the form those comments took: verse — mostly limericks — perfectly rhymed, (usually) metrically impeccable and always germane to whatever recent news item had caught his eye.

His daughter, Beth Eisenberg, announced the death. She said the cause was complications of acute myeloid leukemia.

Dr. Eisenberg's verse made him a cult figure in the lively, atomized, fiercely opinionated parallel universe of The New York Times's online commenters. As Andrew Rosenthal, then the editorial page editor of The Times, wrote in 2012, Dr. Eisenberg was "the closest thing this paper has to a poet in residence."

By day, Dr. Eisenberg was a biomedical electrical engineer who had been a longtime faculty member of Rockefeller University in Manhattan. By night, he was a writer whose stories appeared in magazines like Galaxy Science Fiction and Asimov's Science Fiction.

At every hour, he was a limner of limericks, a form that first seized hold of him at midcentury and refused to relinquish its anapestic grip until the end of his life.

Dr. Eisenberg was the author, with George Gordon, of two collections, both published in 1965: "Limericks for the Loo" and "Limericks for Lantzmen," a volume of Jewish-inflected verse.

But it was for his rhyming contributions to nytimes.com that he was best known in recent years. His first, from July 14, 2008, was in response to an Op-Ed article by Barack Obama, then a United States senator from Illinois and the presumptive Democratic nominee for the presidency.

In the article, which outlined his proposal for the Iraq campaign, Mr. Obama called for the gradual withdrawal of United States combat troops there, a plan that would leave only “a residual force” to “perform limited missions.”

Dr. Eisenberg, a self-described ardent liberal, was having none of this. As he wrote in reply:

A “residual force,” Mr. O.?

With “limited missions,” ah, so,

Precipitous? Nay!

It’s a sure way to stay.

Your plan sounds like “in statu quo”!

In the years that followed, limericks burst forth from Dr. Eisenberg on a welter of subjects.

There was baseball commentary, as in this 2010 post:

True, the Mets lost their place in the Sun,

But the year has moved onward by one,

Wounds have healed, time to grin

At each has-been brought in,

Chance of winning? Between slim & none!

There were TV reviews, like this one, from 2011:

“Homeland” with time brought up to date,

Owes to “Manchurian Candidate”?

Is the theme tired,

And hardly inspired?

Production and cast are first rate.

And after the 2016 election there was copious versification of President Trump:

A mauler, a grabber, abuser,

A do whatever you chooser

Non-thinker, non-reader,

A spoiled-children breeder

An every trick-in-the-book user.

The son of Sidney Eisenberg, a furniture salesman, and Yetta Yellen Eisenberg, a homemaker, Lawrence Eisenberg was born in the Bronx on Dec. 21, 1919.

After graduating from James Monroe High School in the Bronx, he earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the City College of New York, followed by a bachelor of electrical engineering degree there. He went on to earn a master's and a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn. During World War II he was a radar operator with the Army Air Forces.

Dr. Eisenberg joined Rockefeller University in 1958 and later became a director of its electronics laboratory. Early in his tenure at Rockefeller, he helped develop a transistorized, battery-operated cardiac pacemaker, which was considered a vast improvement over the wire-laden earlier models. He taught at the university until 2000.

As a science-fiction writer, Dr. Eisenberg was best known for his short story "What Happened to Auguste Clarot?" The comic tale of a disappearing Parisian scientist, it was published in "Dangerous Visions" (1967), the noted anthology edited by Harlan Ellison.

He was also known for his stories featuring Prof. Emmett Duckworth, an amiably hapless Nobel Prize-winning scientist. (Duckworth's inventions include an intensely addictive aphrodisiac containing 150,000 calories per ounce.)

Dr. Eisenberg's wife, Frances Brenner, a political scientist and social worker, died in 2017. In addition to his daughter, he is survived by a sister, Sondra Baskin; a son, Michael Eisenberg; and a grandson.

A longtime resident of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, Dr. Eisenberg at his death resided in Somerville, Mass. He died at a hospice facility in Lincoln, Mass.

In a 2011 feature, Dr. Eisenberg was asked by The 6th Floor, a Times Magazine blog, to supply a brief biographical summary for readers. He replied — a mere 20 minutes later — in the form he knew best:

A nonagenarian, I,

A sometime writer of sci-fi,

Biomed engineer,

Gen'rally of good cheer,

With lim'ricks in ready supply.

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 27, 2018, on Page B12 of the New York edition with the headline: Larry Eisenberg, 99; His Well of Limericks Never Ran Dry

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